

Unit 2

Ser and Estar

Of all the verbs in the Spanish language, *ser* and *estar* present perhaps the greatest hurdles for the native English speaker. However, because they are two of the most crucial verbs in the language, they deserve the attention they require for their mastery.

To begin, *ser* and *estar* are irregular verbs. This means that they do not follow the nice, tidy conjugations you learned in the preceding unit. Thus you must commit to memory their various forms.

The hurdles referred to, however, have not so much to do with memorizing their forms as learning when to use which verb: *ser* and *estar* both mean "to be." In English, we have only one verb "to be," which, when conjugated, translates to: I *am*, you *are*, he *is*, she *is*, we *are*, they *are*. In Spanish both *ser* and *estar* translate to these same meanings, but contain within them more exact implications. Thus, in learning to work with *ser* and *estar*, you are, in effect, being asked to separate into categories various ways of *being*.

The simplest, but by no means all-inclusive, dichotomy to be made of these verbs is to say that *ser* is used in *enduring* situations, while *estar* is used in situations that are *short-term*, or which involve *location* or the result of some action. Thus, if you want to say, "I *am* a human being," you will use the verb *ser*; but if you want to say, "I *am* kneeling," "I *am* in the library," or "The window *is* open," you will use the verb *estar*.

Below are the conjugations of *ser* and *estar*, followed by a more complete discussion of when you will use these verbs.

<i>ser</i> (to be)	
yo soy (I am)	nosotros somos (we are—m./m. & f.) nosotras somos (we are—f.)
tú eres (you are)	vosotros sois (you all are—m./m. & f.) vosotras sois (you all are—f.)
él es (he is) ella es (she is) usted es (you are)	ellos son (they are—m./m. & f.) ellas son (they are—f.) ustedes son (you all are)

estar (to be)	
yo estoy (I am)	nosotros estamos (we are—m./m. & f.) nosotras estamos (we are—f.)
tú estás (you are)	vosotros estáis (you all are—m./m. & f.) vosotras estáis (you all are—f.)
él está (he is) ella está (she is) usted está (you are)	ellos están (they are—m./m. & f.) ellas están (they are—f.) ustedes están (you all are)

Situations in which *ser* is used

- (1) **Origin:** One's origin is an unchangeable fact, one of the few truly permanent aspects of one's life. It does not matter where you live now: If you were born in Minnesota, you *always* will be from Minnesota. Thus, you would say:

Yo **soy** de Minnesota. I *am* from Minnesota.

¿De dónde **eres** tú? Where *are* you from?

Yuri **es** de Rusia. Yuri *is* from Russia.

- (2) **Relationships:** There are two types of relationships one can have with others: familial and selected.

- A • **Familial:** These are blood relationships (parents, siblings, cousins, etc.), and even though these relationships may sometimes be volatile, they do endure. Thus, one says:

Ellos **son** mis padres. They *are* my parents.

Vosotros **sois** mis hermanos. You *are* my brothers.

Ella **es** mi hermana. She *is* my sister.

- B • **Selected:** Friends, enemies, spouses, employers, etc., achieve relationships with us by selection. And while the status of these relationships does change from time to time, a person generally operates under the assumption that a friend today will be a friend tomorrow, till death do us part. Thus, one says:

Tú **eres** mi amigo. You *are* my friend.

Él **es** mi esposo. He *is* my husband.

Somos **vecinos**. We *are* neighbors.

- (3) **Physical attributes:** Aspects of one's body are not to be taken lightly: They go everywhere with a person—they are not changed by location or how one feels. Even though hair color goes from brunette to gray, and beauty sometimes fades, these changes generally do not take place overnight; rather, they are considered enduring.

Yo **soy** alto/a. I *am* tall.

Rizitos de Oro **es** rubia. Goldilocks *is* blonde.

Ellos **son** delgados. They *are* slim.

- (4) **Personality characteristics:** Like physical attributes, personalities do change from time to time; however, people tend to behave and react to life pretty much the same one day to the next (do not confuse one's personality with his or her moods which can and do change quickly, and thus are covered under *estar*).

Ella **es** amable. She *is* nice.

Ustedes **son** cómicos. You all *are* funny.

Eres cortés. You *are* polite.

- (5) **Possession:** What is yours is yours and nobody can take it from you. Even as you write your will, the house and all its priceless knickknacks are still yours. Just because you can't take them with you doesn't mean they aren't yours until you go!

La casa **es** mía. The house *is* mine.

El cristal **es** mío. The crystal *is* mine.

Nada aquí **es** tuyo. Nothing here *is* yours.

- (6) **Profession:** It is true that most people change jobs, and even careers, many times in their lives. However, one generally does not accept a job offer only to turn around and write his or her letter of resignation. When one is employed, even part-time, the employee takes on the aspects of that position, as though it were an added personality characteristic.

Perry Mason **es** abogado. Perry Mason *is* a lawyer.

Kate Moss y Fabio **son** modelos. Kate Moss and Fabio *are* models.

Ustedes **son** estudiantes. All of you *are* students.

- (7) **Identification:** When identifying anything, whether animal, vegetable, or mineral, you will use *ser*. Some linguistic philosophers will tell you (if you ask) that, independent of the object, names (or identifying words) are meaningless. In other words, the name *is* the object, and thus endures as long as does its referent.

Ésta **es** una frase. This *is* a sentence.

El señor Ed **es** un caballo. Mr. Ed *is* a horse.

Éstos **son** calcetines. These *are* socks.

- (8) **Date and time:** However fleeting time may seem (and therefore short-term—*estar* territory), it still must be argued that now is now. In other words, though it may appear odd to regard the statement, "It is June 11," as enduring, realize that the unstated subject is "Today," as in "Today *is* June 11." Thus, giving the date is actually a form of identification. Similarly, with time, "It is 10:30" has as its unstated subject *now*.

Hoy **es** el veintiséis de septiembre. Today *is* September 26.

Mañana **es** sábado. Tomorrow *is* Saturday.

¿Qué hora **es**? What time *is* it?

Son las tres de la mañana. It's 3:00 a.m.

- (9) **Nationality:** This is similar to origin, in that your place of birth never can be denied. However, the United States being the great melting pot that it is, we differ from persons in many other countries because here one's origin and nationality often differ. Thus, one could say, "Yo soy de los Estados Unidos," indicating *origin*, and, in the same breath, "Yo soy francés," indicating *nationality*. Note that nationalities are not capitalized in Spanish.

Gabriel García Márquez **es** colombiano. Gabriel García Márquez *is* Colombian.

La Princesa Diana **es** inglesa. Princess Diana *is* English.

Dudley Doright **es** canadiense. Dudley Doright *is* Canadian.

- (10) **Natural color:** This is a bit tricky, because color can take either *ser* or *estar*, depending on the changeability of the color. Obviously, grass is green, the sky is blue, and snow is white—in the abstract. However, there are times when the grass is not green, say, after a drought, and who has never seen gray skies or yellow snow? (At these times you would use *estar*.) So remember, when an object is referred to in its natural color, you will use *ser*.

La leche **es** blanca. Milk *is* white.

Mi casa **es** marrón. My house *is* brown.

La bandera de Japón **es** roja y blanca. Japan's flag *is* red and white.

¿Cuál es verdadero o falso para tí?

- | | |
|--|--|
| _____ 1. Soy estudiante. | _____ 8. Las hamburguesas son muy populares en los Estados Unidos. |
| _____ 2. Mi casa es blanca. | _____ 9. Beethoven es famoso por su música. |
| _____ 3. Mi jefe (<i>boss</i>) y yo somos amigos. | _____ 10. Shakespeare es famoso por sus pinturas. |
| _____ 4. Mi mejor (<i>best</i>) amigo es mecánico. | _____ 11. Soy arquitecto. |
| _____ 5. Oprah Winfrey es inteligente. | _____ 12. No soy profesor de inglés. |
| _____ 6. El clima de Hawai es tropical. | |
| _____ 7. Los colores rojo y azul son mis favoritos. | |

ejercicio

I-2-1

*These sentences take the verb **ser** only.*

- I am from the United States. _____
- You are my friend. _____
- He is handsome. _____
- She is very interesting. _____
- They are astronauts (*astronautas*) from another planet (*el planeta*). _____
- You (*pl. fam.*) are American. _____

7. Today is Monday. _____
8. My socks are white. _____
9. Elizabeth Taylor is an actress. _____
10. He is tall. _____ She is tall. _____
11. They are handsome men. _____
12. Where are you all (*pl. fam.*) from? _____
13. We are from Panama. _____
14. What time is it? _____
- It is ten o'clock. _____
15. Who are you? _____ Who are they? _____
16. They are not my friends. _____
17. Fido is my dog and Fufu is your cat. _____
18. Hamburgers and French fries are very popular in the United States. _____
- _____
19. What is this? _____ It is a shoe. _____
20. What is this? _____ It is a flower. _____

Situations in which *estar* is used

- 1 **Location:** The location of *anything* takes *estar*. Whether it is short-term (I *am* in the shower) or permanent (Paris *is* in France), if it's location you're dealing with, your verb is *estar* (not *ser*).

Yo **estoy** en el comedor. I *am* in the dining room.

¿Dónde **estás** tú? Where *are* you?

¿Dónde **está** Londres? Where *is* London?

- 2 **Mood:** One's mood could be termed a short-term personality characteristic. Our moods describe how we feel at any given moment. In our discussion of *ser*, we learned that personality characteristics tend to be pervasive and enduring. But your moods, like your emotional status, ride the roller coaster of life: One day you're happy, the next day you're sad—it all depends on the ever-changing circumstances of your life.

Yo **estoy** feliz. I *am* happy.

Ellos **están** tristes. They *are* sad.

Vosotros **estáis** enojados. You (*pl. fam.*) *are* angry.

Ella **está** de buen/mal humor. She *is* in a good/bad mood.

- 3 **Physical condition:** Like your moods, how you feel physically also changes from day to day: one day hale and hearty, the next day sick as a dog.

Ella **está** bien. She *is* fine.

Estamos enfermos. We *are* sick.

Ellos **están** cansados. They *are* tired.

- 4 **Result of action:** This refers to what you are doing. If you have just sat down, it means that you are seated. Soon you will be standing and, if you are studying this in church, you may be kneeling any minute now. Even being dead, which is about as enduring as it gets, takes *estar*, for it is the result of having lived.

Estoy sentado/a. I *am* seated.

Estás de pie. You *are* standing.

Ella **está** de rodillas. She *is* kneeling.

La mosca **está** muerta. The fly *is* dead.

Estos televisores **están** dañados. These television sets *are* broken.

- 5 **Unnatural color or condition:** When you are very sick, your face may turn green; however, unless you are from another planet, this color is unnatural (and unattractive) to you. Meat that has sat around far too long takes on an unsavory shade of gray; bananas turn black; and old newspapers turn yellow. In a nutshell, in describing things that aren't as they were originally intended, you will use *estar*.

El cielo **está** gris. The sky *is* gray.

Esta nieve **está** amarilla. This snow *is* yellow.

Las manos **están** sucias. Her hands *are* dirty.

Él **está** feo con esos pantalones. He *is* ugly in those pants.

- 6 **Going from the general to the particular:** If you like coffee as I do, then you would agree that "El café *es* la bebida de los dioses" (Coffee *is* the drink of the gods), and you would use *ser* to express this absolute truth. This does not mean, however, that every individual cup of coffee in the world is wonderful. So, when referring to a *specific* cup of coffee, or plate of spaghetti or order of fries, you will use *estar*.

Este café **está** muy bueno. This coffee *is* very good.

Este café **está** malísimo. This coffee *is* horrible.

Estas papas fritas **están** riquísimas. These French fries *are* delicious.

¿Verdadero o falso?

- | | |
|---|---|
| _____ 1. Estoy en mi casa. | _____ 5. Madrid y Sevilla están en España. |
| _____ 2. Estoy interesado/a en español. | _____ 6. Mi mejor amigo/a y yo estamos enfermos/as. |
| _____ 3. Mi mejor amigo/a probablemente está en casa. | _____ 7. Estoy sentado/a. |
| _____ 4. México está en Norteamérica. | _____ 8. A veces, una persona está de rodillas en la iglesia. |

_____ 9. No estoy de pie.

_____ 10. Cristóbal Colón está muerto.

_____ 11. Cuando miro la televisión por muchas horas, estoy aburrido/a.

_____ 12. Normalmente, mis amigos y yo estamos de buen humor.

ejercicio
I-2-2

*These sentences take the verb **estar** only.*

1. I am with John. _____ I am not with John. _____
2. She is with Marcos. _____ She is not with Marcos. _____
3. I am fine. _____ I am not happy. _____
4. Where are you? _____ Where is Felipe? _____
5. John is mad. _____ They are mad. _____
6. Jane is standing but we are sitting. _____
7. I am sad because you are not here. _____
8. Jane is anxious because we are not ready. _____
9. He is kneeling because we are in the church. _____
10. The chairs are not in the kitchen. _____
11. Many boys are in the house. _____
12. Why are you (*pl. fam.*) here? _____
13. Argentina is in South America. _____
14. Are the dogs in the living room? _____
15. The tomatoes are green. _____
16. This chicken (*el pollo*) is very good! _____
17. John is depressed (*deprimido*). _____
18. Why aren't you happy? _____
19. She is embarrassed (*avergonzada*). _____
20. They are in a bad mood because the television is broken and therefore (*por eso*) they are bored. _____

ejercicio

I-2-3

Fill in the blanks below with the appropriate use of *ser* or *estar*.

1. Yo _____ enfermo/a.
2. Yo _____ alto/a.
3. Tú _____ en la escuela.
4. Ellos _____ americanos.
5. Juan _____ feliz.
6. Tú _____ una persona amable.
7. Nosotros _____ tristes.
8. Este pescado _____ delicioso.
9. Vosotras _____ bonitas.
10. ¿Cómo _____ tú?
11. ¿Dónde _____ Juan?
12. ¿De dónde _____ tú?
13. Martín _____ médico.
14. Mis plumas _____ rojas.
15. Ustedes _____ con Paco y José.
16. Ellas _____ amigas de Felipe.
17. Tú _____ bajo/a.
18. Nosotros _____ bajos.
19. St. Paul _____ en Minnesota.
20. ¿Quién _____ el Presidente de los Estados Unidos?
21. La banana _____ negra.
22. Mi coche no _____ en el garaje.
23. ¿Qué hora _____ ?
_____ las dos y media de la tarde.
24. Vosotros _____ cansados.
25. Yo _____ de buen humor.

traducción

I-2-4

When I am happy I sing, but today I am in a bad mood. My cat is sick, my television is broken, and this morning my coffee is terrible. Today is Monday. I work in a bookstore. Two people are in the store now, a man and a woman. The man is tall and he is looking for books that don't exist. Why is he here? The woman is short and very thin. She buys the newspaper here every day. Sometimes she reads five or six magazines beforehand. She always wears sunglasses and a big hat. She is very mysterious. I believe that she is a spy. Who is she and why is she here?